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# The “Arab Spring” and its Theoretical Significance: Samuel Huntington’s Theory, “The Clash of Civilizations,” Revisited

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## Abstract

Using the characteristics and the demands of the recent uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa or so called “Arab Spring,” this study questions the significance of some propositions deduced from Huntington’ popular theory of “The Clash of Civilizations.” The research asserts that globalization, especially the development of new technology, has created opportunities for the new generations in the region to be acculturated with a set of values reflecting their basic civilian and human rights. The new values, while credited with the development in the West, belong to all human beings and are gaining the status of universal human culture. The development of this universal culture undermines Huntington’s clash of civilizations. The paper ends with an explanation of why Huntington puts his emphasis on “clashes,” rather than a “universal culture” or “alliance” of cultures.

## Keywords

Human Rights, Clash of Civilizations, Universal Cultural, Arab Spring

Samuel Huntington was one of the most popular but controversial American social scientists, especially among scholars involved with the issue of culture and/or global socio-political changes. Since the publication of his book, *The Clash of Civilizations*, literally hundreds, probably thousands of books or papers have been published, and conferences or speeches have been assembled to cover the validity and significance of the “Clash of Civilizations.” The theory, originally published as an article in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993, was mostly dismissed by the intellectual community, but after the September 11 terrorist attack in the United States, “Huntington’s triumph” started and “The Clash of Civilizations” became the New York Times bestseller book (Abrahamian 2003). In interviews with

Media, for example *Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* (August 18, 2006), Huntington said the 9/11 event confirmed the clash of cultures and civilizations.<sup>1</sup> His critiques, however, disagree with his underlying theoretical assumptions. For example, Edward Said (2001) has confronted the notion of fixed civilizations and puts more emphasis on the dynamics and interdependence of most civilizations.<sup>2</sup> Fred Halliday, a British Middle Eastern specialist, portrays the theory as extremism supported by anti-modernists and fundamentalists because “East and West” for them are separate and they “are all distinct and there will inevitably be conflict” (2002:194). He explains political tensions between the Muslims and the West by international politics of the West, especially in the Middle East between USA-Israel dissention with Muslims over Palestine as the main cause of the 9/11 terrorism (2001).<sup>3</sup> One can have the same impression from Brzezinski’s strategic vision on “America’s stake in a constructive resolution of Israel-Palestinian conflict. This conflict poisons the atmosphere of the Middle East, contributes to Muslim extremism, and is directly damaging to American national interests” (2012:124). Michael Dunn characterized the clash of civilizations as the ideology of conservatives on both sides, i.e., Al-Qaeda or fundamentalist Muslims and neo-conservatives in the West. “Clearly, the creation of a discourse that portrays ‘Islam’ on the one hand and ‘the West’ on the other is... beneficial to the leaders of Islamic militant groups” (2006-7:5). Finally, “Clashes of Civilizations” entails to assume a civilization as the unit of analysis while underestimating the clashes *within* a civilization; there are fundamental disagreements among the Muslim communities themselves, for example between Shias and Sunnis, on the meaning of “Islamic Culture,” which is at the center of Huntington’s theory.

The recent regional Muslim uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa, or so called “Arab Spring,” have developed new realities upon which sociologists can assess variety of the theories and/or propositions conceptualized in several sociological fields, such as social change and revolution, political sociology, cultural universalism, social identity, and so on. Unlike the September 11/2001 event, the regional Muslim uprisings challenge the validity of Huntington’s theory and demand more robust propositions to explain socio-political clashes on national and international levels. This paper, using

qualitative data (such as the characteristics of the uprisings and their public demands, citations from reporters and Middle Eastern experts, etc.) argues against the “*clashes*” of civilizations as the *major* source of conflicts in the post Cold-War era. Rather, it underlines the power of an emerging universal human culture (set of values) composed of basic human and civil rights without ignoring the importance of native cultures. This newly development human culture as expressed today, regardless of its historical roots, emerged from the Post-World War II human and civil right discourses (Donnelly 1989). The response of the Muslim world to this newly developed culture, unlike Huntington’s view in the “Clash of Civilizations,” has been very mixed from assimilation to confrontation.<sup>4</sup> Most extreme Muslims such as Al-Qaeda and Taliban, rejecting the Western culture including human rights, offer the Sharia law as the only alternative. Others, especially educated people such as Wafa Sultan, the Arab-American author of *A God Who Hates* (2011) or Abdel-Samad, an Egypt-German author and journalist (2010), considers human rights as the values of all human beings. The research rests on the awakening idea in the Muslim world, especially among the new generation, *directed against their states* failed to resolve their socio-economic problems while *suppressing their human rights*. First, the author argues the newly developed human culture was underestimated in Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations.” Furthermore, putting more emphasis on human dignity as the cause or incentive behind the regional socio-political uprisings, the research challenges Huntington’s “cultural identity” as the driving force behind the clashes of civilizations. Finally, the paper addresses *why* Huntington comes to **clash**, rather than **alliance** of cultures, more specifically between Islam and the West. But first, a brief review of “*The Clash of Civilizations*” and a short background of the regional Muslim uprisings, upon which the shortcomings of Huntington’s theory would be assessed.

## THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

In response to Francis Fukuyama’s book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, published in 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union and inspired by Bernard Lewis’ article, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1990, Samuel Huntington proposed the clashes of religions, especially between Muslims and the

West, under the “Clash of Civilizations” as the primary source of international conflicts in the Post-Cold War era. The central theme of the book, as Huntington says, “...is that culture and cultural identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, are shaping the patterns of cohesion, disintegration, and conflict in the Post-Cold world” (1996:20).

Before Huntington’s paradigm, Bernard Lewis (1990) theorized the “Roots of Muslim Rage” against the Western Civilization in his article and later developed it in his book, *Islam and the West* (1993). According to Lewis, Muslims in clash with Western Civilization have “suffered from three successive stages of defeats.” During the first stage, they lost their domination in the world to the advancing power of the West. Then, it was the era in which the Muslims’ authority was undermined in their own countries, “through an invasion of foreign ideas and ways of life.” Finally, “their mastery in their own houses was challenged by their emancipated women to rebellious children...It was too much to endure, and the outbreak of rage against these alien and infidel forces was inevitable” (1990:49).

Huntington elaborated and expanded Bernard Lewis’ theory to large-scale conflicts in the Post-Cold War era among seven to eight major civilizations, especially between the West and “non-West.” He argues that the fundamental source of conflicts in the Post-Cold War era would not be primarily ideological but cultural between different civilizations. Since the people of different civilizations have different views on their social relationships, for example, between citizens and state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as different views of “rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy” (1993:25). These differences are the products of centuries and will not soon disappear. In these conflicts, Huntington adds, the key question is not “*Which side were you on*” as it was during the Cold-War within which people could choose and change the sides. In conflicts between civilizations, the question is “*What are you?*” The answer for this question cannot be easily changed. Now the international issues are “between Western and Islamic civilizations has been going on for 1,300 years and it would unlikely to cease” (1993:31).

While Huntington identifies seven to eight civilizations, the core of the clashes in the book is limited to between the West and

“the rest,” specifically between the United States and the Islamic culture. He says “the underlying problem for the West is not the *Islamic fundamentalism*. Rather, *it is Islam*, a different civilization whose people is convinced of the superiority of their cultural identity and is obsessed with the inferiority of their power” (1996:217, emphasis added). He specifies five factors intensified the conflicts between Islam and the West in the Twentieth Century:

First, Muslim population growth which has generated large numbers of unemployed and disaffected young people who become recruits to Islamist causes, exert pressure on neighboring societies, and migrate to the West. Second, the Islamic Resurgence has given Muslims a renewed confidence in the distinctive character and worth of their civilization and values compared to those of the West. Third, the West’s simultaneous efforts to universalize its values and institutions, to maintain its military and economic superiority, and to intervene in conflicts in the Muslim world generate intense resentment among Muslims. Fourth, the collapse of communism removed the common enemy of the West and Islam and left each the perceived major threat to the other. Fifth, the increasing contacts between Muslims and Westerners stimulate in each a new sense of their own identity and how it differs from that of the other. Interaction and intermingling also exacerbate differences over the rights of members of civilization in a country dominated by members of the other civilization. Within both Muslim and Christian societies, tolerance for the other declined sharply in the 1980s and 1990s. (1996:211).

## THE “ARAB SPRING”

The movements apparently started in Tunisia on December 17, 2010, when a young man, Mohammad Bouazizi, set himself on

fire in front of a local municipal office because the police confiscated his card and beat him the day before, and his complaint was ignored. Before the Tunisian uprising, however, the Islamic Republic of Iran experienced its own public uprising, called the “green movement” after the disputed presidential election in June 12, 2009. Iranians are not Arab but a majority are Muslim. However, like the other Middle-Eastern and North-African nations, the Iranians have suffered from authoritarian and tyrannical regimes for many decades. The uprising was peaceful and the public demand was simple; “where is my vote?” They were asking for nullification of the official results which were rigged, based on many reliable reports. For example, Hooman Majd, author and an observer of the events, reported that “the Green Movement.., led by the reformists but also a spontaneous creation of its own—a sort of immaculate conception of the political kind—was Iran’s first real civil rights movement, one not so unlike the civil rights movement in the United States a short half-century ago” (2010:43). He adds:

Iranians came out onto the street—  
young, old, bearded, clean-shaven, chador-clad,  
pious, secular, and Chanel-wearing fashionistas for  
all to see, to register their disapproval of what they  
believed to be a rigged vote, an insult to every  
Iranian who believed that the *one* truly democratic  
aspect of their system had been rudely violated  
(54).<sup>5</sup>

Some Middle Eastern experts agree that the Iranian green movement has inspired the Arab uprisings, and their success, in turn, further encourages and sustains the Iranian democracy-seekers.<sup>6</sup> While the Iranian regime suppressed the uprising by arresting, torturing, and killing hundreds of activists and called them “proxy of foreign foes,” the oppositions are still alive, and according to *Christian Science Monitor* (June 2011) “the movement has achieved its goal by gaining high moral ground, revealing the true face of the Islamic Regime, and draining away much of its political legitimacy.”<sup>7</sup> However, unlike the suppressed Iranian green movement, the uprising in Tunisia was successful and inspired new waves of unrest in some other Muslim

nations, such as Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Yemen, Morocco, Bahrain, and Syria.

In Tunisia, small demonstrations started in Bouazizi's hometown and spread throughout the country. While desperate self-sacrifice highlighted public frustration over living standards and economic inequality, the core of protests however were against police brutality, official unaccountability, lack of transparency, and suppressed civilian and human rights. For example, Dalacoura reported one of the popular protest chants: "We can live on bread and water alone but not with RCD [Ben Ali's ruling party]" (2012:67).<sup>8</sup> The outcome of Tunisia's uprising has been cautiously promising since the moderate Islamic party, Ennahda with a shrewd leader, Al-Ghannouchi, made a coalition government with secular parties and openly rejected the Iranian type of Islamic Republic. According to Esam Al-Amin (2011), a writer and journalist, "Tunisian people have sent an unambiguous message that they want moderate Islamists and secularists to work together in establishing democratic governance and building a just socio-economic system, while preserving hard-won freedoms and liberties, as well as respecting human rights and the Arab-Islamic identity of Tunisia."<sup>9</sup>

In Egypt, following the overthrow of Ben Ali in Tunisia, the uprising started in Cairo and spread throughout the country. The demonstrations were peaceful and the demands mostly addressed on the economic hardship and inequality while the chants were focused on democracy, freedom, and human rights. Like Tunisia, the Mubarak regime attempted to crash the uprising but failed since the opposition was mostly united, regardless of their religions. For instance, according to Aljazeera reports, Christians were protecting Muslims at the Friday prayers and the Muslims did the same for the Christians on the following Sunday.<sup>10</sup> The prospect for democracy and human rights in Egypt is mixed. Some believe the Middle East in general is "immune" to "democratization." Others are cautiously optimistic. Ajami, a Middle-Eastern specialist and a Lebanese's-American fellow in the Hoover Institute, says a "plausible division of spoils and responsibility might give the [Islamic] Brotherhood the domains of governance dearest to it—education, social welfare, and the judiciary—with the military getting defense... Liberal secularists would have large numbers, a say in the rhythm of daily life in a country so



hard to regiment and organize, and the chance to field a compelling potential leader in a future presidential election”(2012:4).<sup>11</sup> The unity and technocratic government of Prime Minister Hisham Qandil and the recent public criticism and demonstrations against the undemocratic Islamist elements of the newly written constitution mainly support such an optimism.

In Libya, Qaddafi ruled the country since 1969 as a military dictator. He repressed the basic rights of his citizens and ruthlessly crushed dissidents. According to Billingsley, “Libya has no history of rule of law and no experience with a competitive political process. Sharia was the formal basis of law and was frequently applied to matters of family law...the regime tended to wield power arbitrarily, with little attempt to cloak its actions in legal cover” (2011:4). He also adds that “Libya’s draft constitutional charter...is encouraging. The document prohibits discrimination on the ground of race, religion, and political opinions. The charter also guarantees women ‘all opportunities’ to participate in the political, economic, and social spheres” (2011:4).<sup>12</sup>

By the end of 2011, three governments had been overthrown—Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, and Gaddafi in Libya; more recently, in early 2012, Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen. The Syrian regime has killed more than 60,000 of its citizens based on the recent United Nations report.<sup>13</sup> The UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon who has spoken several times with Bashar Al-Assad, the Syrian president, condemned the continuing violence of the regime against the peaceful demonstrations, most particularly the use of tank and live fire that killed and injured thousands of people. Meanwhile, some other Arab leaders, understanding the nature of public demands and the escalation of the uprisings, such as King Abdullah in Jordan and King Mohammad VI in Morocco, have made significant political and social reforms in their constitutions and thereby in their governments. For example, King Abdullah dismissed unpopular Samir Rifai’s government and asked Marouf-al-Bakhit to form a new government with the purpose of reforms and newly proposed constitutional amendments. In Morocco, the king had appointed a committee to revise the constitution which was approved in a referendum on June 30, 2011.

Overall, many observers and reporters agree that the protesters have represented a broad coalition of poor and middle classes, Muslims and Christians, men and women, especially young generations who have access to internet and new mass media. While it is hard to generalize, anti-West, anti-American, and even anti-Israeli slogans were absent in the uprisings. Indeed, as Dalacoura (2012) reported, the most demands were firmly on national issues, political and economic, not primarily on Arabism and Islam. Paul Salam (2011), the director of Carnegie Middle Eastern Center in Beirut, in an interview with "Hurriyet Daily News" stressed:

Now we are entering a new era. We had the era where political Islam in a non-democratic, often violent, format was the proposed solution. This is the era where democratization is the key. Political Islam is coming under the context and conditions of a democracy. And obviously the Turkish example of a party with Islamic roots successful in a democratic state is the most attractive model for the states that have been through a revolution (2011:2).<sup>14</sup>

The common denominators of the uprisings can be classified under the features or characteristics of the uprisings and the major public demands. With regard to the characteristics, the uprisings were launched and organized mostly by youths; the Internet (Facebook, Twitter, Mobile-phone, YouTube, etc.) played significant roles in organizing the unrests and the satellite, especially the Qatari-based Al-Jazeera, on broadcasting the events; finally, the uprisings have been *initially* peaceful and civilized, while extremism, violence, and terrorism were condemned. On the public demands, the emphases have been on economic and employment opportunities; asking for governmental accountability and opposing to corruption; demanding the rules of law with respect to freedom, democracy, and human rights.

## CLASHES OF CULTURES OR TENDENCY TOWARD A UNIVERSAL CULTURE

Huntington minimizes the emergence of a universal culture, a set of values reflecting basic human and civil rights, since the “central elements of any culture or civilization are language and religion.” Therefore, a universal civilization requires a global culture with a universal religion and language. He adds, “If a universal civilization is emerging, there should be tendencies towards the emergence of a universal language and a universal religion” (1996:59). No evidence exists to support that English or any other languages have been gaining the universal status since “throughout history the distribution of languages in the world has reflected the distribution of power in the world” (1996:62). The same is correct about a “universal” religion. The “data do show increase in the proportions of the world population adhering to the two major proselytizing religions, Islam and Christianity, over eighty years” (1996:65).<sup>15</sup> Therefore, “*universalism is the ideology of the West for confrontations with non-Western cultures* [emphasis added].” The “*most enthusiastic proponents of the single civilization idea are intellectual migrants to the West...for whom the concept provides a highly satisfying answer to the central question: Who am I?*” (1996:66) [Emphasis added].

The regional uprisings and their public demands are not consistent with Huntington’s “non-universal human culture” proposition. For example, Tawakkol Abdel-Salam Karman, a Yemeni activist in the uprisings who later became one of the three Nobel Peace Prize winners in 2011, summed up the characteristics of the uprisings and the major public demands in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech. She started her speech with “[i]n the name of God the Compassionate the Merciful” and added:

At this moment, as I speak to you here, young Arab people, both women and men, march in peaceful demonstrations demanding freedom and dignity...The Arab people who are revolting in a peaceful and civilized manner have, for so many decades, been oppressed and suppressed by the regimes of authoritarian tyrants who have indulged themselves deeply in corruption and in

looting the wealth of their people...The people have decided to break free and walk in the footsteps of civilized free people of the world... Our youth revolution is peaceful and popular and is motivated by a just cause, and has just demands and legitimate objectives, which fully meet all divine laws, secular conventions and charters of international human rights...peace, human coexistence, fight against corruption and organized crime, war on terrorism, and resistance to violence, extremism and dictatorship, ...and are cherished by the whole international community. The revolutions of the Arab spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria, and other Arab countries,...in terms of motivation, driving power and objectives, didn't take place on isolated islands cut off from all the rapid and astonishing developments and changes which our world is witnessing. The Arab people have woken up just to see how poor a share of freedom, democracy and dignity they have... This experience is somewhat similar to the spring that swept throughout Eastern Europe after the downfall of the Soviet Union.<sup>16</sup>

Tawakkol's speech, reflecting the uprising characteristics and demands, does not confirm Huntington's proposition that universal culture is the "ideology of the West" to confront non-Western cultures. Freedom, democracy, and human rights in general, while credited with development in the West, belong to all human beings. They have gained the status of "cultural universals" in sociology. The people in the region, like Tawakkol, are not intellectual migrants to the West who are looking for a satisfying answer for "*Who am I.*" Rather, they are ordinary citizens who ask for their civil and human rights in *their own nations*. Second, the people in the region, like all the citizens in the international community, have started their peaceful uprising against governmental corruption and asking for democratically-elected, accountable governments that respect their human and

civilian rights. All the uprisings originally rejected extremism and demanded their rights in a civilized manner; as Tawakkol expressed in her speech, they rejected extremism and followed the civilian means to achieve their civil goals. Finally, while Tawakkol did not ignore her “Islamic identity” when she started her acceptance speech with an Islamic phrase and her hair covered, but she did not ask for an Islamic government or Sharia law, rather, she underlined their human and civil rights. The same have been reported among the other groups, including the Islamists, such as the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt and Ennahda in Tunisia.<sup>17</sup> Dalacoura comes to the same conclusion that “[n]one of the uprisings was led by an Islamic movement or posited a demand for an Islamic state; if anything, they were post-ideological, patriotic and ‘introverted’ in the sense of being focused on internal national politics” (2012:79). Thus, Samuel Huntington’s reductionism of civilization to religion leads him to overemphasize the conflicting elements of Western and Muslim cultures while ignoring/underestimating the power of the shared and evolving universal civil and human values which have been enhanced in universal culture.

#### THE DRIVING FORCE: HUMAN DIGNITY OR CULTURAL IDENTITY

The driving force behind the clashes of civilizations is “cultural identity” as the answer to “*who am I?*” Huntington says “identity almost always is defined by religion.” Religion, psychologically, provides the most reassuring and supportive identity during rapid social transformation. “Religion provides compelling answers, and religious groups provide small social communities to replace those lost through urbanization...Religions give people identity by positing a basic distinction between believers and nonbelievers, between superior in-group and a different and inferior out-group” (1996 97). Huntington adds that the new generation of Muslim is not going to be necessarily “fundamentalists but will be much more committed to Islam than their predecessors... As a result, the early years of the twenty first century are likely to see an ongoing resurgence of non-Western power and culture and the clash of the peoples of non-West civilization with the West” (1996:121),

especially between Islam and the West. Thus, following Huntington's proposition, "Islamic identity" is and should be the driving force, especially among young Muslims, for socio-political changes at the national or international levels.

The public demands in the uprisings have not been in agreement with his "cultural identity" proposition either. Emphases in human rights and human dignity, rather than Islamic identity, were the major demands in all the uprisings. Three activists in the regional uprisings, who were later announced winners of Roland Berger Human Dignity Award in Berlin and shared their EUR 1 million award in November 2011, did not mention their cultural identity as their driving force in the uprisings. Rather, they emphasized human dignity and human rights in the acceptance speeches—Ms. Radhia Nasraoui from Tunisia (the founder of the Association for the Fight Against Torture in Tunisia); Gamal Eid from Egypt (the founder of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, ANHRI), and Mr. Mazen Darwish from Syria (the founder of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression—SCM). Gamal Eid, for example, said "I am extremely proud to be honored together with two of the greatest human rights campaigners in the Arab world. I have devoted myself to this task because I firmly believe human rights activists need to focus on supporting the people who live under repression and desire nothing more than to live in democracy." Mazen Darwish said "History teaches us the price of freedom may be high; but the price of tyranny is even higher... to date more than 4000 Syrian (women, men, and children) have paid for road to freedom with their lives after overcoming the barrier of fear..."<sup>18</sup> Marquand, the *Christian Science Monitor* staff writer, conceived "human dignity" as the major search at the heart of the "Arab Spring." He wrote, Qaddafi asked "Libyans to rely on his 'moral authority'- a request that ever more sophisticated Arab generations widely read as an insult to their intelligence." "Eating bread is no longer enough. They want bread, liberty, and dignity. Is that too much to ask?" (2011). Hillary Clinton, the Secretary of the United States said in Geneva, February 28, 2011: "We see in their struggles a universal yearning for dignity and respect. And they remind us that the power of human dignity is always underestimated until the day it finally prevails...This moment belongs to the people, particularly the young people, of the Middle East."<sup>19</sup>

These and many other regional facts substantiate the following points: First, the uprisings were against the regimes having the same cultural identity but *suppressing* their civil rights and human dignity. Unlike Huntington's expectation, the public's demands in the streets were not "cultural identity," and the activists were asking for the support of *human rights organizations and the West*, rather than chanting against or seeking to *clash* with the West. Second, as earlier mentioned, the public demands for democracy and human dignity do not necessarily mean that the activists have ignored their cultural identity. Most of the activists and participants in the uprisings, without undermining their native cultural identity, have been fighting for their dignity and human rights, *that is, for the elements of their universal culture*. In fact, their clashes with their Muslim tyrants for their human dignity and freedom reveal the alliance rather than the clash with cultures. Brzezinski, unlike Huntington, believes that the moderate Islamic identity is compatible with democratization:

Turkey's internal democratization and spread—modernization is evidence that neither democratization nor modernization is incompatible with Islamic religious traditions. Such democratization is of great importance to the political future of the Islamic world as well as to global stability... A Turkey that is increasingly Western, secular, and yet also Islamic—and that exploits its territorial and cultural connection with the people of the old Ottoman Empire and post Soviet Central Asian states – could be a Turkey that underestimates the appeal of Islamic extremism and enhances regional stability ... (2012:138).

The alliance of culture/civilizations was proposed at the 59<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the United Nations in 2005 co-sponsored by Turkish Prime-Minister Tayyip Erdogan and the President of Spain, Luis Rodrigues.<sup>20</sup> Finally, Huntington's view on "Islamic identity" as a stable entity which "has been a seesaw for 1,300 years" ignores the dynamism of human identity. Social psychology teaches us that

identity is a dynamic human quality that evolves during any socialization process. People may develop and change their identity based on their religion, nationality, language, or human values. The young Muslims, because of their growing access to ideals of human and civil rights in the West during the last several decades, are gaining awareness of their human and civil rights and evolving their identity. This identity transformation sometimes involves conflicting cultural elements. Gallop Polls of the Islamic world or Pew Surveys have revealed a variety of conflicting cultural elements among Middle Eastern Muslims. For example, Pew surveys show 82% of Egyptians supported stoning as a punishment for adultery, while 90% supported freedom of religion, and 70% were against censorship, or a Gallop Poll shows "some 93% of the those surveyed called themselves 'moderate' Muslims" and the remaining 7% identified themselves as 'radicals' but "admire the West for its democracy and freedom. However, they do not want such things imposed on them."<sup>21</sup>

## WHY HUNTINGTON STRESSES ON THE "CLASHES" OF CIVILIZATIONS

"The Clash of Civilizations" stands on, at least, three questionable assumptions. First, Huntington *overestimates* Muslim fundamentalism: While he says the underlying problem for the West is Islam, not Islamic fundamentalism, his evidence mostly comes from extremists. For example, Huntington says, "...it is hardly surprising that following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, an intercivilizational quasi war developed between Islam and the West" (1996:216).<sup>22</sup> He adds, "Khomeini declared, quite accurately, that 'Iran is effectively at war with America, and Qadhafi regularly proclaims holy war against the West'" (1996:216). For Huntington, this *renewed* war between Islam and the West started with "perceived 'gharbzadegi' or Westoxication" among Muslims during the 1980s and 1990s (1996:213). Huntington quotes from Barry Buzan and Bernard Lewis showing the West's *perception* of the clash between the two cultures, concluding that the West "prepared not only to support a societal Cold War with Islam, but to adopt policies that encourages it" (1996:213).

The uprisings' characteristics and their demands, including the Iranian green movement, have proven otherwise. There was no single expression or demand in the uprisings to show hostile attitudes



of the people toward the West, including the United States. During the 9/11/ 2001 incident, despite the hostile attitude of the Iranian *regime*, thousands of Iranian people displayed sympathy toward the United States people and against terrorism by holding a public candlelight vigil. Dunn asserts after all, “Osama bin Laden’s attempts to provoke a ‘clash of civilizations’ have ‘turned out to be a spectacular failure.’ One can find evidence for this in the Iranians who gathered outside of the US embassy in Tehran on the night of 9/11, not to chant anti-US slogans but to offer their sympathies, or to the enduring anti-war movement in the West. These examples are antitheses on the ‘clash of civilization’...” (2006-7:07). During the recent regional uprisings, the people not only called for their human and civil rights (so called Western Values) but asked for Western help to fight against their *Muslim* leaders who suppressed their rights. Despite Qadhafi’s rhetoric, Libyan people overthrew him by Western supports. Thousands of Muslims have died in Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Syria, not in *clashes* between Islam and the West, but in clashes with their *Muslim* governments with the same cultural identity. Furthermore, Huntington uses “Westoxication” a few times to display the renewal of the Muslim hatred toward the West. The term “gharbzadegi” (Westoxication) originally came from Iran during 1970s when a leftist writer (Jalal Al-e Ahmad) published a book with the same title which attracted the attention of some educated people during the Cold-War era. However, the book and the author’s ideas were later strongly challenged by almost all intellectuals and educated publics, especially *after* the 1979 Iranian revolution. Finally, unlike Huntington’s expectation, fundamentalist regimes, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, are not the role models for the uprisings. Dalacoura concludes that “the uprisings are a confirmation that the appeal of the Iranian Islamist model is declining....In those cases where Islamists may benefit directly from the unfolding political changes, as in Tunisia and Egypt, they look for inspiration to the success of Turkey’s AKP rather than Iran” (2012:79). The same has been confirmed by other Middle Eastern experts that Muslim Brotherhood “are realizing that if they cannot get jobs and the economy going, people will not like them either...They look to Turkey for advice not to Islamic Theology of Iran. They know that they have more to learn from Turkey than from Saudi Arabia or Iran.” “Islamic slogans were hardly visible during

uprisings even though Islamists were there." They agreed on the words "civil state"; as the new buzz words.<sup>23</sup>

Second, Huntington *reduces the meaning of culture*: If one limits the meaning of culture and civilization to "religion plus language," Huntington is right none of the participants in the regional uprisings was demanding to change their religion or language. However, Huntington, by emphasizing religion and language as the core of culture, underestimated the meaning and evolving nature of culture. Culture has a much broader definition than "religion plus language." Culture consists of all the shared products of human society. These products are of two basic kinds, material and non-material. Some of these "shared products" have been universal because of common natural environment. However, cultural universals do not merely derive from common natural environment; rather, social and cultural contacts with other civilizations have been the major source of acculturation. The demands in the uprisings revealed the evolving nature of generational culture, including their *human and civil values and rights*. During the uprising, the participants revealed their answer to Huntington's question, "*who am I*." The answer was, like all other people, *I am a citizen and a human being* and asking for my rights, before putting any emphasis on my language or religion.

Finally, Huntington *under-powers cultural dynamism*: Rejecting universal culture, Huntington acknowledges the "universal nature of modernization." Modernization comprises "industrialization, urbanization, increasing levels of literacy, education..., social mobilization, and more..." (1996:68). But surprisingly, he ignores or underestimates the roles of increasing literacy, education, social mobilization, and sciences on cultural changes and on the mentality of people, especially on youth. Universal new technology such as internet, Twitter, Face-book, YouTube, and so on, as *evidence of modernization*, has facilitated cultural exchanges and exposed "universal human culture" to new generations in the Muslim world. Huntington's theory, the clash of civilizations, underestimates the significant impacts of modernization on the mentality and culture of people, especially on younger generations. The interactive nature of new technologies and their accessibility to the public, especially to educated people, are exposing and educating them to their human and civil rights. Bernard Lewis is right when he says it is not easy to create

free institutions “in a political culture where religion and ethics have been more concerned with duties than with rights, in which obedience to legitimate authority is a religious obligation as well as political necessity...” (1994:47). However, both Huntington and Lewis have underestimated the dynamic and speed of cultural transformation in the new technology era within the Muslim nations. The time-unit of cultural change within new generations, including Muslims, no longer is a century or even a decade, but rather years. The characteristics of social relationships and mentality of one generation becomes culture of the new generation after a few or more years. Elaborating on William Wilson’s (2010) proposition on today’s dynamic societies, social structure and mentality of one generation *becomes culture of the newer generation*.

## CONCLUSIONS

As Salam said, the Twenty-First Century in the Middle East is the era of democratization; “*political Islam is evolving within the context of a democracy*” (2011:02). Such a transformation, however, is not and will not be peaceful, especially between the West and fundamentalist Muslims such as Al-Qaida in the region, and/or the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. This confirms and is consistent with Huntington’s “the fault-line” conflicts. It is, however, part of the regional reality. The uprisings have revealed an evolving new reality reflecting political, civil, and human right-awakening in the region, which is establishing a new culture, or universal culture along with their native cultures. This evolving new culture was underestimated/ ignored in Huntington’s clashes of civilizations. The uprisings have proved a significant shift in the tendency and attitudes of young Muslims toward the West, viewing “Western culture” (the human and civilian culture credited with blooming in the West) as their “alliance” and supporter of their human and civil rights. The new Muslim generations who have worried Huntington because of their “cultural identity” turned out to be the *agent* of this cultural transformation in the region. Huntington says the Post-Cold War era would not be ideological, rather “clashes of civilizations,” but his cultural reductionism in the final analysis turns the “clash of civilizations” to clashes between two *ideological extremists*, Muslim extremism and neo-conservatism; the following diagram displays his reductionism.<sup>24</sup>

Civilization → Culture → Religion plus Language → Religion → Fundamentalism

Civilization is originally reduced to culture; culture reduced to religion plus language; because there are *no clashes over the languages*, in reality, "the clashes of civilizations" is nothing more than "the clashes of religions," more specifically between Islam and the West; finally his documentations are almost entirely focused on Islamist extremism.

Of course, we should not glorify "Arab Spring" and celebrate assumed upcoming democratic and accountable states respecting their human and civil rights. The uprisings were started by young secular activists who rejected both US-backed dictators, such as Mubarak, and religious extremism like Iranian theocracy. The overthrow of tyrants, however, is much easier than building democratic institutions and mentality. Furthermore, there are socio-economic groups, both secular and religious, in all of those nations that are eager to restore their status or to gain power and resources. The uprisings may result in other tyrannical regimes or fundamentalist theocracies as it did in Iran. However, as the evidence and the public demands revealed, the uprisings displayed many positive signs of "awakening." For the first time, the people in the street, *regardless of their religion*, were demanding their rights and fighting for their human dignity, not for religious or "Cultural Identity." The uprising and their public demands have proved that freedom, democracy, and civil rights belong to all human beings. They have gained the status of "cultural universal" in sociology.

Furthermore, if there is any clash or clashes between the Islamic and the Western cultures or civilizations, as proposed by Huntington for the early decades of the Twenty-First Century, the uprisings have revealed it is not necessarily *between* the West and Islam, rather between two generations *within* the Islamic civilization. The new generation in the Muslim nations are awakening, but not "Islamic-Awakening" alleged by the Iranian "supreme leader" Khamane'i; rather "political-awakening" (Brzezinski, 2012) or more meticulously, "human and civil rights-awakening." This awareness undermines and challenges the status and power of tyrannical leaders, either religious, such as the Islamic Republic leaders, or secular tyrannies as in the cases of the Arab Spring. Hamed Abdel-Samad

made the following remark on the clashes of the Islamic and the Western civilizations.

As far as I can tell, the ‘clash of civilizations’ seized upon by the late Samuel Huntington has long become reality. But it is important to realize that it take place not only between Islam and the West, as many suspected it, but also within the Islamic world itself. It is an inter-Islamic clash between individualism and conformity pressure, between continuity and innovation, modernity and the past.<sup>25</sup>

In Abdel-Samad’s view, the Islamic world is in crisis. “I view today’s Islam as seriously ill, both culturally and socially, as in retreat.” Fundamentalism and religiously motivated violence reflect “merely nervous reactions to this retreat” (See: Endnote 24). Almost the similar remark was made by Wafa Sultan on the nature of clashes between Muslim fundamentalism and the West.

The clash we are witnessing around the world is not a clash of religions or a clash of civilizations. It is a clash between two opposites, between eras. It is a clash between a mentality that belongs to the Middle Ages and another mentality that belongs to the 21th century. It is a clash between civilization and backwardness, between the civilized and the primitive, between barbarity and rationality. It is a clash between freedom and oppression, between democracy and dictatorship. It is a clash between human rights, on the one hand, and violation of the rights, on the other hand. It is a clash between those who treat women like beasts, and those who treat them like human beings.” (Al-Jazeera TV, Feb 21, 2006).<sup>26</sup>

While both Abdel-Samad’s view and Sultan’s remark are their own individual and intellectual assessments of the Islamic world

and not the public Muslim mentality and social reality, they reveal, however, that the cultural *alliance* or the growing *universal human culture* along with their native culture are awakening them to *their human and civil rights*. Such awareness makes them to question, reinterpret, and sometimes react to their religiously imposed "duties," and this is a promising sign of cultural transformation.

Finally, the economic hardship, especially higher unemployment rates among the educated youth as well tremendous socio-economic inequality as the driving force and the major *immediate cause* of the uprisings should not be ignored. For example, according to the United Nations' *Human Development Research Paper* (Salehi-Isfahani 2010), youth are the most educated segment of the population in the region, yet suffer greater exclusion for economic and civic life. The same report shows, unlike the West where education is productive, *the unemployment rates are higher among the most educated people in the region, especially among youth*. "If we accept that lower unemployment rates in the middle and high-income countries are indications of higher productivity of their educated workers, the fact that MENA [Middle Eastern and North Africa] workers with secondary and tertiary education suffer greater unemployment suggests that education in MENA is less productive than elsewhere" (13). The Iranian labor-minister recently reported that "the unemployment rate among the university graduates is *ten times higher* than the ones with high-school or lower education."<sup>27</sup> However, despite the economic hardship and higher unemployment rates among the educated youth, freedom, democracy, and respect of human dignity were the most chanted and expressed demands among the activists and youth who participated in the uprisings. This is a notable lesson that most socio-political activists as well as the public have learned from history, especially from the collapse of the former Soviet Union. *It is not possible to achieve economic justice through tyrannical regimes* (so called "dictatorship of proletariat" in the communist nations); democracy, freedom, and respect of human and civil rights are preconditions to gain better economic justice and socio-economic equality.

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## Endnotes

- 1.<http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/Five-Years-After-911The-Clash-of-Civilizations-Revisited.aspx>. See also *New York Times* (October 13, 2001).
- 2.The core of Edward Said critiques on clashes of civilizations can be found in his earlier writings, especially in his popular thesis "essentialism" vs. "non-essentialism." Said challenges the idea that Western Culture is rationale, developed, and superior while the Middle Eastern and North African Cultures are undeveloped, static, and irrational. For more see, Edward Said (1979) *Orientalism*.
- 3."The Clash of Civilizations" is "a perfect paradigm, a thing that defines its own field of investigation, that defines its concepts, that makes predictions, that even has its own concept of falsification, then the perfect example is astrology. The problem is, astrology is non-sense" (2002:195). For more detailed view of Halliday on September 11, 2001, see his excellent book: *Two Hours That Shook the World. 11 September 2001, Causes and Consequences*.
- 4.Fred Halliday (1996) classifies the Muslims' responses to modern human right values into five categories—assimilation, appropriation, particularism, confrontation, incompatibility.
- 5.For more on the 2009 election fraud and counter claim, see for example : [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian\\_presidential\\_election,\\_2009](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_presidential_election,_2009) or [http://www.iranaffairs.com/iran\\_affairs/2009/06/iran-elections-claims-and-counterclaims-analyzed.html](http://www.iranaffairs.com/iran_affairs/2009/06/iran-elections-claims-and-counterclaims-analyzed.html)



6. For more see, Charles Kurzman (2012) or the following sources:  
<http://journals.cambridge.org/download.php?file=%2FMES%2F0020743811001346a.pdf&code=b7d911d6728c99a628e851f47f408cbf> or <http://www.thepeoplesvoice.org/TPV3/Voices.php/2011/01/31/iran-s-green-movement-still-inspires>

7. <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Global-Viewpoint/2011/0615/Iran-s-Green-Movement-has-actually-achieved-its-goal>

8. For more see: [http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Arab\\_Spring](http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Arab_Spring)

9. See: Esam Al-Amin. 2011. "Understanding Tunisia's Election Results." In *International Policy Digest*: October 28-30 (<http://www.internationalpolicydigest.org/author/esam-al-amin/>)

10. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1353330/Egypt-protests-Christians-join-hands-protect-Muslims-pray-Cairo-protests.html>

11. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/137053/fouad-ajami/the-arab-spring-at-one>

12. <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136699/anthony-billingsley/writing-constitutions-in-the-wake-of-the-arab-spring>

13. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=43866&Cr=syria&Cr1>

14. <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=8216arab-spring-forces-looking-to-turkey-rather-than-iran-model8217-2011-10-28>

15. Huntington intentionally underestimated the growth of "non-religious," atheists, and agnostics. The same table that shows the growing Muslims from 12.4% in 1900 to 19.2% in 2000 (estimated); Christianity from 26.9% in 1900 to 29.9% in 2000 (estimated) also shows the percentage of non-religious people has grown up from 0.2% in 1900 to 17.1% in 2000 (estimated) and atheists from 0% to 4.2% in 2000 (estimated). A 2008 Gallup poll showed that 6% of the

US population believed that no god or universal spirit exists. The most recent ARIS report, released March 9, 2009, found in 2008, 34.2 million Americans (15.0%) claim no religion, of which 1.6% explicitly describes itself as atheist or agnostic, nearly double the previous 2001 ARIS survey figure of 0.9%. The highest occurrence of "nones", according to the 2008 ARIS report, reside in Vermont, with 34% surveyed. The latest statistics show that a lack of religious identity increased in every US state between 1990 and 2008.

16. The Nobel Peace Prize 2011: [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobelprizes/peace/laureates/2011/karman-lecture\\_en.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobelprizes/peace/laureates/2011/karman-lecture_en.html)

17. See for example, Stephen Zunes (2011), Egypt: Lessons in Democracy: <http://www.yesmagazine.org/peace-justice/egypt-lessons-in-democracy>

18. [Barbara Diesner, Roland Berger Stiftung](http://www.human-dignity-forum.org/2011/11/roland-berger-preis-fuer-menschenwuerde-an-frau-radhia-nasraoui-das-arabic-network-for-human-rights-information-und-herrn-mazen-darwish-verliehen/) (2011). Roland Berger Human Dignity Award 2011 presented to Radhia Nasraoui, the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information and Mazen Darwish: <http://www.human-dignity-forum.org/2011/11/roland-berger-preis-fuer-menschenwuerde-an-frau-radhia-nasraoui-das-arabic-network-for-human-rights-information-und-herrn-mazen-darwish-verliehen/>

19. Citation: <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/the-monitors-view/2012/0109/Arab-Spring-justice-but-a-free-pass-for-Yemen-s-Saleh>

20. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alliance\\_of\\_Civilizations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alliance_of_Civilizations)

21. Pew Research Center Publications: Egypt, democracy, and Islam. 01/31, 2011: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1874/egypt-protests-democracy-islam-influence-politics-islamic-extremism> and also see: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7267100.stm>

22. It is quasi for three reasons. First, all of Islam has not been fighting all the West... Second, it has been fought with limited means: terrorism from one side and air power, covert action, and

economic sanctions on the other. Third, it is a quasi war because while the violence has been continuing, it has not been continuous.”

23. See daily News: Arab Wave Sweeps Iran model out, Turkey ‘In’ 10-28-2011: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=8216arab-spring-forces-looking-to-turkey-rather-than-iran-model8217-2011-10-28>

24. Jonathan Cook (2008) in his book, *Israel and the Clash of Civilization* has an extensive discussion on the issue of neo conservatives in the United States and in Israel to turn the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into the clashes of cultures. “Nonetheless, Israel and the neocons [neo-conservatives] may have believed that there were benefits to be derived from the growth of Islamic radicalism too.... The question of what to do with the Palestinians has increasingly been tied to the question of what the West should do about the Islamic extremism. Israel has therefore been nurturing a view of itself as on the frontiers of the West in an epoch-changing clash of civilizations. In particular, Israel and the neocons have seized the opportunity presented by the war ‘war on terror’ to reshape the Middle East in their own interests” (p. xv).

25. <http://www.theglobalist.com/printStoryId.aspx?StoryId=8696>

26. Sultan, Wafa (Al-Jazeera TV, Feb 21, 2006 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIC9WKDrJ-k&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nIC9WKDrJ-k&feature=player_embedded) or <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFLc5IX8x6k>

27. For example, the unemployment rate in USA for 2011 were 2.4% for professional degree, 2.5% for doctoral degrees, 3.6% for masters’ degree, 4.9% bachelor’s degree, 6.8% associated degree...9.4% for high school diploma, and 14.1% for less than high school diploma (BLS: [http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep\\_chart\\_001.htm](http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm)). For Iranian reports see: <http://www.mihan.net/press/?=7035&print=1>. For the United Nations reports on education and the unemployment see: [http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2010/papers/HDRP\\_2010\\_26.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2010/papers/HDRP_2010_26.pdf).

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